

Fiction by Reza Negarestani

Introduced by China Miéville

Produced and consumed by ideologized human brains—than which there are no more ruthless taxonomizing machines—all literature is genre (including that “litfic,” the marketing campaign of which has convinced a section of the commentariat that it is, rather, the a-generic asymptote of literature). And genres have protocols, which can be honored or breached, but not (at least very rarely successfully) ignored. That need not hamstring: as the Oulipians long ago clarified, constraints can be self-administered cattle prods to creativity. That said, of course, (1) protocol-observance is less often surprising than flatly predictable; in part for which reason (2) we are tremendously excited (often perhaps exaggeratedly so) by works that chafe self-consciously at categorical edges. Some might gnaw from within at the (not-really-“rules” of their genre-cauls; others, more confident, use their fidelity to such norms as fulcrums for sublation, to become something ineluctable from but irreducible to genre. This, to steal an invaluable term from Kim Newman, is “post-genre” horror—and fantasy, and science fiction.

So Reza Negarestani. Negarestani’s astounding work is at once *indelibly* generic—obsessed, as here, by the problematics, furniture and wow-porn of SF/F/H—and unremittingly strange and evasive. It abjures even categorization as fiction or nonfiction: is science-fictional prose-poem; a philosophical handbook that reads like a thriller; the world’s most arcane and erudite monster hunt. *Cyclonopedia*, his “novel” from which this extract is culled and, Moreau-like, doctored, is both old-school SF/horror pulp and, if we are lucky, a founding text of some new mo(ve)ment.

—China Miéville

Outlines for a Science Fiction of the Earth as Narrated from a Nethermost Point of View

Reza Negarestani

11 March 2004. Somewhere amidst the fog of the Net, behind a seemingly forgotten website, in Hyperstition’s password-protected laboratory—a location for exploring hyperstitions or fictions capable of turning themselves into reality—there is a tumultuous discussion. The commotion has begun over the newly discovered notes of the former professor of Tehran University, the archeologist of middle-eastern cultures Dr. Hamid Parsani.

A page from Parsani’s turgid notes reads:

In 647 BCE, the Assyrians decimated the Elamite civilization on the pretext that an unnameable abomination was surfacing in the lands of Elam, and that everything that came into contact with that benighted entity had to be eradicated. Ashurbanipal, the king of Assyria, triumphantly claimed that in order to purge the land and cleanse the kingdom of creatures, he carried away the bones of the Elamite people toward the land of Ashur, disinterred their tombs and exposed them to the bleaching rays of the Sun and even sowed the land with salt and quicklime so that for centuries both the animate and the inanimate would be left unharmed and untainted. Reportedly, the Assyrian king came upon a desert in Elam where thousands of vultures were soaring in swirling formations above a distant location. Assuming an inhabited oasis plundered and its denizens slain, he marshaled his army in that direction. Yet upon arriving at the site, he saw only a vast crater of rippling blackness that the agitated mercenaries described as the black corpse of the sun and called by a foreign appellation, *naphta*. Once the king stared into the starless pit, he beheld in the frothing ripples the marriage

of the earth and the sun from which a child was born who schemed for parricide so as to rejoin the abyssal depths to which it illegitimately belonged and to reenact once again the absolute freedom of alien depths.

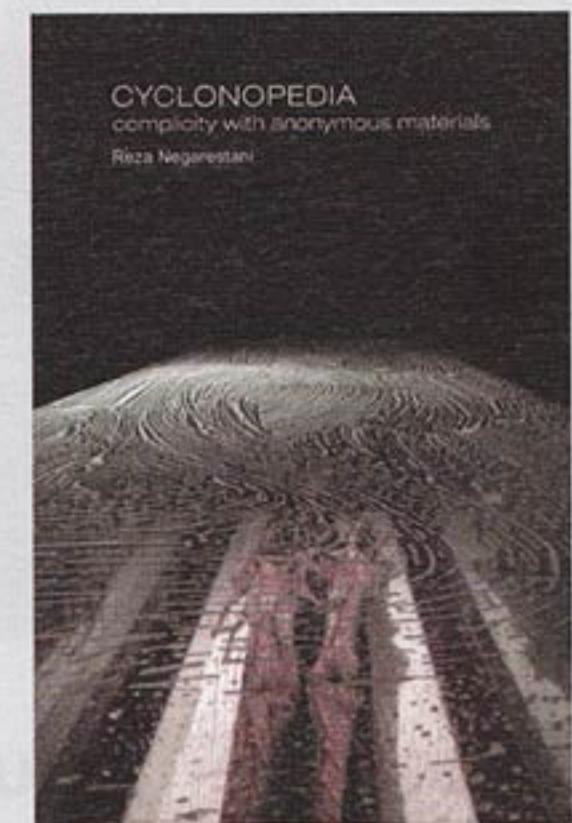
The discovery of these notes coincided with one of Hyperstition's projects concerning formulating a unified narrative viewpoint for grasping sociopolitical undercurrents, petropolitical antagonisms and science-fictional futurities of the Middle East. Parsani had stated that in order to see the human psyche from the standpoint of middle-eastern civilizations and to understand these civilizations from the perspective of the tellurian dynamics that form them and, finally, in order to study the dynamics of the earth in terms of the most abyssal cosmological processes, one must embrace the nethermost viewpoint of petroleum. It is not really a matter of thinking from the deep perspective of oil but rather to unreservedly admit that it is oil that thinks through us. Taking its cue from Parsani, who had referred to petrol as the lubricant of terrestrial narrations, Hyperstition decided to develop a narrative viewpoint by which the fictive scenarios of the earth's futurity, their clashes, and complicities could be grasped by the cohesive ubiquity of oil as both a sentient entity and a narrative lube. The narrative of living petroleum whose wetness couples perfectly with dust and deserts could also engender a peculiarly middle-eastern science fiction.

The nethermost or what Hyperstition had dubbed as a *blobjective* narrative viewpoint was further developed through a chthonic recontextualization of Dean Koontz's pulp-sci-fi novel *Phantoms*. Koontz's novel centers on a sentient civilization-eating plague called the Ancient Enemy. The Ancient Enemy shares xenomorphic traits with both the Antichrist and the Thing; it is a predator unapproachably slithering between organic and inorganic domains. Traces of porphyrin, a chemical compound common to blood, plants, and petroleum, are found in corpses of its victims. The Ancient Enemy or the tellurian Antichrist that haunts dead seas is petroleum or *napht* (the Arabic word for oil).

According to the biogenic theory of fossil fuels, petroleum was formed under pressure and heat in the absence of oxygen while sadistically counting organic death tolls for millennia. Under such extreme conditions, petroleum grew a satanic

verve for reanimating the dead and puppetizing the living on a planetary scale. A precursor to *blobjective* narratives, Koontz's imagery grasps the "Thingness" of oil as a singular inorganic body fueling the Conradian journey "up-river," from the gas station to the chthonic oil reservoir via the tentacled edifice of oil pipelines. From a nethermost point of view, Bush and Bin Laden are merely petropolitical puppets convulsing along the chthonic strings of the blob just in the same way a Chinese plastic toy and equally an American predator drone are brought to life by the strings woven from the hydrocarbon corpse juice. Since technological scenarios of science fiction are themselves fictions turned into reality by the cavernous stirrings of petroleum, a middle-eastern science fiction abandons technophilic plots in favor of plot-holes dug in terrestrial narratives by the greasy appendages of petroleum. ("When it comes to seeing through the pipeline, the technological machines of enlightenment are particularly petromongoloid."—Parsani)

Although the theory of fossil fuels underwrites the narrative coherency of oil as a psychopath that runs on blackened blood, its depth and longevity are constrained by the life of organisms. In order to deepen the nether narrative of oil as a "pest that walketh in the outer dark" and broaden science-fictional potencies of Earth's futurities, the avatar of petroleum as the Blob or the Thing must also be extended outside of what the astrophysicist Thomas Gold calls the myth of fossil fuels. For Gold, petroleum has its origin in alien hydrocarbons of deep space, which have been trapped in the bowels of the earth. Since these alien relics are in flux within the planet, the patterns of oil distribution are susceptible to change. In this sense the science-fictional vision inherent to the terrestrial architecture of industrial civilizations becomes contingent upon Plutonic migrations of these alien inorganic demons. Eluding biological origins, oil is not of this place but of estranging depths; it has already infested the earth as an Insider for which scenarios of alien invasion are but melodramatic redundancies. If petrostilence has already invaded and colonized the earth, the entire history of terrestrial life is an era of postoccupation, and our postindustrial, oil-driven achievements that ground the foundations of our science-fictional imagination are simply exploits of a radical outsider in building its own porous earth. □



Reza Negarestani is an Iranian philosopher and writer born in Shiraz, Iran. He is the author of *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (re.press, 2008), a work of theory and fiction on the Middle East and petroleum as sentient entities. He has also written extensively for such journals and anthologies as *Collapse*, *Angelaki*, and *CTheory*. He is on the editorial boards of the academic journals *Glossator* and *Post-medieval*. He is currently working on a new book entitled *The Mortiloquist*, a play staging an interpretation of the history of Western philosophy with elements borrowed from Greek tragedies and Jacobean revenge dramas to fantastic literature and weird fiction.

China Miéville is an award-winning and *New York Times* best-selling author. He lives and works in London. An excerpt from his "rejectamentalist manifesto" appears on page 41.